Essay

*What am I? On reacquaintance with John Clare's poem, 'I am' in the time of Covid-19*

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Thirty years ago, in my mid-twenties, I was commuting in and out of central London on the underground, where, in the oblong-shaped advertising hoardings that ran above the seats opposite, instead of an advert, I came upon John Clare's poem, 'I am'.

> I am – yet what I am none cares or knows
> My friends forsake me like a memory lost;
> I am the self-consumer of my woes,
> They rise and vanish in oblivious host
> Like shades in love and death's oblivion lost
> And yet I am – and live, with shadows tossed
>
> Into the nothingness of scorn and noise,
> Into the living sea of waking dreams,
> Where there is neither sense of life nor joys,
> But the vast shipwreck of my life's esteems;
> And e'en the dearest, that I loved the best
> Are strange – nay, rather stranger than the rest.
>
> I long for scenes where man has never trod,
> A place where woman never smiled or wept
> There to abide with my creator, God,
> And sleep as I in childhood sweetly slept,
> Untroubled and untroubling where I lie;
> The grass below – above the vaulted sky.

The poem could be read in two gulps between stations, that subterranean rumble and press, "the nothingness of scorn and noise". How sweet it was to enter for a moment as the poet does the untroubled image of countryside, of cool green grass, of blasted open sky.

I often regret that I missed by a whisker that generation of children who were required to learn poetry by heart; it meant I never acquired the habit. Yet certain lines from this poem, once read, are not easily forgotten: “I am the self-consumer of my woes”, like a cap spun from the asylum where Clare spent the last twenty or so years of his life,

> over the heads of men
> who’ve gone off to work in factories,
> of telephone wires,
> of two world wars,
> of Freud and Jung,
> of votes for women,
> mass consumption,
> Martin Luther King,
> the iphone,
> instant messaging,

to land as if I’d come up with the line myself, a perfect fit: *I am the self-consumer of my woes,* a sympathetic note that reverberates to the ends of my fingers and toes. The poem, I decide, will become my project, determined that, if nothing else, I will commit it to heart.

I have lived on my own for many more years of my life than I’ve lived with another adult: four fifths of my grown-up life. Not entirely alone. I’ve been a single parent to a daughter for roughly two thirds of that time (though, as any lone parent will attest, being solely responsible for a child can be a squaring of loneliness); but she, too, is now grown up, and making her own way in life. When lockdown struck, I didn’t imagine the rules of social isolation would overly affect me. I was used to my own company, to meting out my time. How much worse would it be to be cooped up with someone you might not even like anymore, let alone someone who did you harm? This is what I told myself, though it was wearing thin. I came to see, with no recourse to the mirror distractions or validations of the outside world, that there was another kind of reckoning going on. Relativity (who is worse off than who) becomes a different proposition under pressure, especially when it comes to

being confined in your own head, when, like a butterfly trapped, there's nothing to compare, only the blind imperative to thrash your way out.

What am I, then? Who am I?

In this depopulated state, the question took on existential proportions. I asked it again, more urgently, and, as if a hammer had tapped my knee, the answer sprang back from some buried reflex: *I am, yet what I am none cares or knows*.

It has taken certain poets and scholars of the twentieth century to grant John Clare his place among the outstanding writers of the Romantic age, preeminent chronicler of the natural world, whose scrupulous observational style, in many ways, travels better than Wordsworth's or Byron's, poets he so admired. Clare's early legacy was to be recognised as a freakish genius. His last doctor, in reporting his death, noted the "frequent connection between mental aberration and genius" – the former condition had led to Clare spending the last third of his life in the Northampton General Lunatic Asylum, where, among hundreds of other poems, 'I am' was written.

From a cursory trawl of the internet, it becomes apparent that, in spite of neglect, this single visionary lyric has rarely been out of circulation. But I soon discover that, barring variations in punctuation and spelling (whose niceties Clare was subject to by editors), there are different versions. There's the version I encountered on the tube, reproduced on popular poetry sites – poets.org, poemhunter.com, poemsearcher.com, among them – and then there is this version, which I see for the first time, and which contains a single line, startingly unfamiliar:

I am – yet what I am, none cares or knows;
My friends forsake me like a memory lost: –
I am the self-consumer of my woes; –
They rise and vanish in oblivion's host,
Like shadows in love's frenzied stifled throes: –

"Like shadows in love's frenzied stifled throes": I do a double-take. This is no case of a transposing of line-endings, or reassignment of apostrophes; this new line ushers into the poem's mournful wash of abstraction a concrete, embodied image of sex. How much more

vivid, visually and rhythmically, than the line ("like shades in love and death's oblivion lost"), which I find reproduced in the anthology *Poems on the Underground* (1999). This alternative line steals the energy and the eye – those bodies, or their shadows, caught in flagrante; the thrusting rhythm, the onomatopoeia detectable in those clusters of consonants ("frenzied stifled throes") bring a kind of mimetic perfection – language fused to the thing it describes.

The poem, I discover, was first published in the *Bedford Times* on New Year's Day, 1848, and then reprinted on the poet's death in *The Spectator*, 1864, and, again, the following year, when it accompanied a review of *The Life of John Clare*, speedily put together by a maverick scholar, Frederick Martin. It is this version of the poem that made such an impression on Gerard Manley Hopkins, a twenty-year-old undergraduate at Oxford in his own state of crisis, castigating himself for "impure habits", for "looking at a man who tempted me on Port Meadow". He copies the poem into his diary:

I am! yet what I am who cares or knows?
My friends forsake me like a memory lost.
I am the self-consumer of my woes,
They rise and vanish, an oblivious host,
Shadows of life, whose very soul is lost.
And yet I am – I live – tho' I am toss'd

Into the nothingness of scorn and noise,
Into the living sea of waking dream,
Where there is neither sense of joy, nor joys,
But the huge shipwreck of my own esteem
And all that's dear. Even those I loved the best
Are strange – nay, they are stranger than the rest.

I long for scenes where man has never trod,

For scenes where woman never smiled or wept;
There to abide with my Creator, God,
And sleep as I in childhood sweetly slept
Full of high thoughts, unborn. So let me lie,
The grass below; above the vaulted sky.

Apart from Hopkins' slip in substituting "joy" for "life" in line 9, this is also the version that is later reproduced among three poems of Clare's chosen by Arthur Quiller-Couch for *The Oxford Book of Victorian Verse* (1912). Compared to the Underground version, it reads as a rudimentary draft, its power and affect present but muted, and containing the kinds of infelicities you might expect in a draft – the repetition of "scenes" in the first two lines of the last stanza; the slightly awkward rhythm and sentiment of "full of high thoughts, unborn", which stands in place of the far more striking and original "untroubled and untroubling".

Perhaps Martin obtained a copy of the poem from someone he talked to in his researches? If he did, he doesn't specify, though he is fulsome in his description of it as "the last, and […] noblest of all his poems. Clare's swan-song," he says, "will live as long as the English language." The biography is full of such enthusiastic embroideries: 'I am', in fact, was not Clare's last poem, but in ascribing a valedictory power to it, Martin is not wrong in his belief in its ability to far outlive its author.

I became obsessed, trying to find online (because then there was no other way of doing it) the moment when these distinct lines come into being. In the presence of "frenzied stifled throes", "love and death's oblivion lost" pales to insignificance. The former has a tuning-fork authenticity, not only because it is so much more vivid, but because it is unexpected and transgressive ("stifled"), speaking unguardedly of sexual desire and consummation. The image exacerbates the sense of yearning and loss present in the poem by giving it a precise and tangible form, complicating the emotion with a frankness that overleaps the manners of its age; not the sanctified love of family and friends, but the unspeakable physical intimacy of lovers. (Would Hopkins had he been able to read that line be comforted or tormented?) The rawness is electric, upping the contrast and the stakes:

how much greater the feat of imaginative will that attempts to repudiate such knowledge, swapping it for the childlike condition of prelapsarian innocence, to arrive at the end of the third stanza in a state of apparent equilibrium: “The grass below – above, the vaulted sky”, a seesaw of mind over matter and matter over mind.

One of the programmes I was watching at the beginning of lockdown was *Normal People*, the TV adaptation of Sally Rooney’s novel. It charts the ins and outs of a first relationship, told in painful close-up to its two main characters, Marianne and Connell, through their last years of adolescence, to the beginnings of independence and maturity. I consumed those twelve half-hour episodes in three blocks of four, happily handing myself over to a two-hour dip into a universe of experience that from the plateau of middle age I was able to recall as if in a dream.

The series has been roundly acclaimed and particularly noted for the way it handled the sex scenes, which are relatively many. These were choreographed by an “intimacy co-ordinator”, a novel role, whose serious attention helped bestow on those scenes an unusual sense of narrative integrity. I was glad, nonetheless, to watch the episodes on my own, unselfconsciously. A marker of the programme’s success must be how easily I was drawn back to a time when the gloves were off, a time of bumbling curiosity peculiar to that first awareness of oneself as body – raw, hyper-sensitive, the amazement of reciprocated desire, melting, turbid, here.

I have been on my own, slept on my own, for years, and hadn’t allowed myself much thought as to what I was missing. In fact, if I thought about it at all, I’d decided that I was better off, removed from the peculiar agonies that that kind of intimacy can bring. The memory of it, though, is not entirely lost; it exists like invisible ink written into the body’s core and activated now into a nostalgia of loneliness and longing. *I am, yet what I am none cares or knows*. The poem no longer speaks to me, it speaks for me; not so much overheard as participated in. We, who are the age Clare was; those of us who live alone or feel alone, finding ourselves in even more isolating circumstances, a temporary suspension from the bustle of the ordinary working world, are prompted to look backwards and take stock: what have we amounted to, if anything; who is with us or against us. It is a pivotal condition, a questioning of what or who we are, or what, indeed, alone, this life is for.

John Clare enjoyed a brief and heady period of literary success heralded by the publication in 1820 of his first book, *Poems, Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery*. In an autobiographical fragment, he describes setting off for his first visit to London that same year. He is twenty-seven and alert to the effects this change in circumstances might bring. He has high expectations of the city from stories he's heard around the fire, he says:

> when I turned to the recollections of the past by seeing people at my old occupations of ploughing and ditching in the fields by the road side while I was lolling in a coach the novelty created such strange feelings that I could almost fancy that my identity as well as my occupations had changed that I was not the same John Clare but that some stranger soul had jumped into my skin…

That word "lolling" contains so much: although he has ostensibly put by his "old occupations", it is from this viewpoint, the agricultural labourer's, that he continues to regard himself, sending himself up as an idler of a different class, full of the promise and novelty of what a new literary life might bring, yet aware that however magical the transformation, it would somehow be a removal from himself, "the same John Clare".

A decade and seven children later, though he'd continued to publish, literary fashion had changed; there'd been a recession, and he was in dispute with his publishers over money. He'd moved his family from the two-bedroom cottage they shared with his parents and sister into a place of their own in the nearby village of Northborough. But the move, Clare felt, was a mistake; he was already suffering bouts of depression. In the poem, 'On Leaving the Cottage of my Birth', his sense of alienation can be seen to extend to the furniture: "I sit me in my corner chair / That seems to feel itself from home".

Eliza Cook, a champion of workers' and women's rights, produced a journal in which, in 1851, when Clare was already ten years into his second and final long stint in an asylum, she produces a sketch of the poet. She conjectures that, far from doing him any favours, the literary fame he'd briefly enjoyed had only helped destabilise him:

> perhaps he finds he has mounted into a sphere where he has no natural supporters, where he is petted, patronized, borne with, perhaps spoiled, and where, severed from the class to which he naturally belonged, he floats adrift upon the surface of

> society, without a definite place or function – ill at ease, miserable, and sometimes *frantic with disappointment*.

"My friends forsake me like a memory lost": The simile, "me like a memory", unfolds to philosophical proportions. Do I exist only in as much as I appear in the memory of friends? Without them to remember who I am, how can I know? And the situation in the poem only gets worse: that memory where I have existed is *lost*. Although the inversion of the adjective "lost" is convenient in terms of rhyme, Clare is too deft a poet for it not to earn its place at the line end: "I am like a memory" would be one thing; "like a memory lost" is a whole other level of displacement, whose effects can be seen in reverse some eight lines later: "Even the dearest that I love the best / Are strange – nay, rather, stranger than the rest" (the half-rhyme, "lost" / "best", "rest", picks up the connection). So much depended on recognition that the loss of it renders those who were formerly "dearest", by a process of logical equivalence, the most strange.

The poem was beginning to seep into my being like prophecy. The weeks turned into months, and the months were beginning to tell. There's guilt - even as I toil up the back of the steep hill beyond my lane to take my daily exercise - that I am relatively unscathed; I am not on the breadline, retain my part-time job. But I am not immune. If, in this neck of the woods, the virus has yet to take a toll, I find I am acquiring it by proxy: the constant white noise that emanates from my computer screen, an unspecific feeling of persecution and dread. One day I come downstairs and the strawberries I'd left out on the side have been bound overnight in a fuzz of silver-white mould. Three months in and I fall out with a friend who was no friend, and, worse still, with a sister. We are all at the end of our tethers. This doesn't happen, it can't happen, it is too catastrophic. But there we are. The walls begin to cave in.

Clare had at least one sympathetic and instrumental friend in the asylum. William Knight became Head Steward in 1845. He took a keen interest in Clare's poetry, copying out over 800 pencilled drafts into neat copperplate, preserved to this day in two bound volumes in Northampton Central Library. Knight was key among a small band of well-meaning men that included Joseph Stenson, a partner in an iron-scrap works, and Thomas Inskip, a noted watchmaker and poetry lover. Between them, they encouraged and commented on Clare's writing.

Knight was the trusted amanuensis, and was keenly aware of the trust that was placed in him. He promised to copy out poems for Stenson on the understanding that the poems wouldn't be passed on, "for I fear I should not get any more by my transgressing of what ought to be kept sacred". In December 1846, he writes to Stenson telling him that he's sent Inskip, "that piece of Clare's 'I am'", which assumes that Stenson had already seen the poem. Inskip had been arranging to have odd poems of Clare's published in the *Bedford Times*.

The latest and most authoritative biography of Clare was published in 2003 by Jonathan Bate. Here, Bate attributes to the *Bedford Times* the same version of the poem that he also reproduces in his accompanying and newly edited edition of Clare's *Selected Poems*. Though a footnote in the biography mentions that there are "minor variants" to the text, I am surprised to see that the "frenzied stifled" line is present, and not entirely convinced. Or at least, I ask, if this is the earliest published version, where and when did that substitute line first creep in?

I can discover no documentary evidence online and seem to have hit a wall. But a friend more schooled in research than I am suggests I email the various libraries who hold the originals. I have been itching to see Knight's manuscript for myself, but, with travel restrictions, had given up any hope of doing so, imagining the library, in any case, would be shut. But I send off two speculative emails, one, requesting a copy of the relevant page of the local paper, and the other to the archivist at Northampton.

Meanwhile, William Knight has found another job, this time in Birmingham, and in 1849, he leaves Northampton. It is a desperate blow to Clare, who writes pitifully in 1850, "I am still wanting like Sternes Prisoners Starling to 'get out' but can't find the Way…"

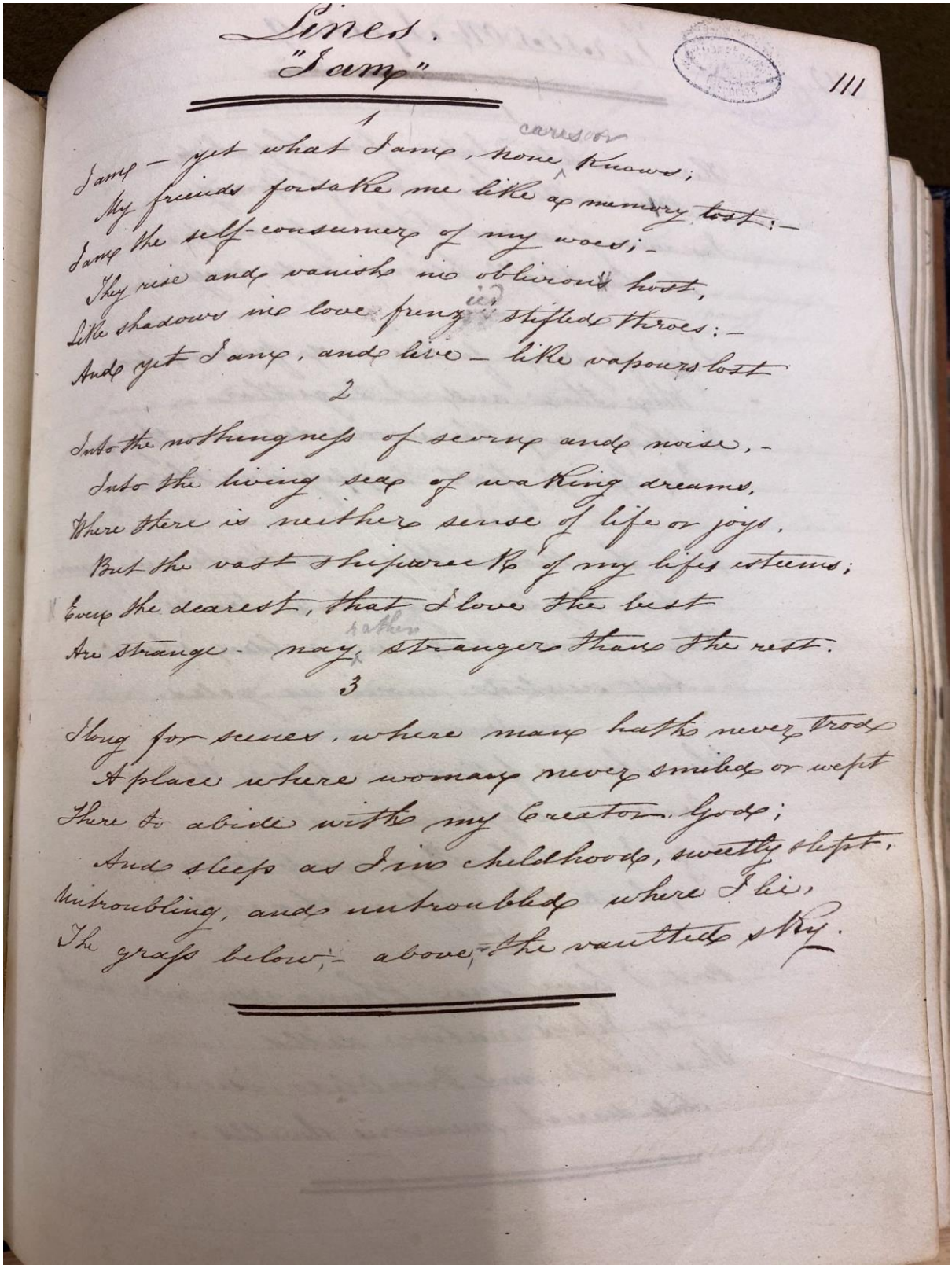
That image of the starling from Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey* (1768) has by the nineteenth century become a cliché distinct from its literary origins (Maria Bertram conjures it in *Mansfield Park* (1814) to justify her flightiness around Henry Crawford). In the novel, Yorick, Sterne's happy-go-lucky protagonist, jokes about spending time "at the French King's expense" in the Bastille. The Bastille, he argues, can be no real hardship for "the terror is in the word. […] the Bastile is but another word for a tower; – and a tower is but another word for a house you can't get out of." But he's interrupted in his musings by a sound from the hotel courtyard, where he is staying. At first he thinks it must be a child, but when he

investigates further he finds a starling "hung in a little cage": "I cannot get out!" it repeats plaintively. Yorick attempts to free the bird; is traumatised by the bird's distress and his failure to release it. The episode punctures his frivolous, intellectual ideation, alerting him to the true *feeling* of what it must be like to be deprived of liberty. As a kind of penance, he devotes the whole of the following chapter to imagining the miseries of a human captive, wasting away in his prison cell.

Most readers might naturally ally themselves to Yorick, the teller of the tale, but Clare's identification is immediately with the captive. At least twice from Northampton he writes to his wife comparing the asylum to "the Bastile", where "I am in Prison", a place "where harmless people are trapped and tortured till they die". For Yorick the plight of the starling is a metaphorical prompt for the lot of a prisoner, but for Clare the two images are confounded and made literal: he envisions the reality of the captive's cell where prisoner and starling are thrown in together. By grammatical conflation ("Sternes Prisoners starling") the starling is restored to pole position, "harmless", "trapped", an allegiance that will be no surprise to anyone who has read Clare on the Badger, the Clock-a-Clay, the Snipe.

It isn't two days since I emailed the libraries and I'm amazed to find a reply from one waiting in my Inbox: The team is currently working remotely, it says, *but it should be possible to direct a member of staff to the storage safe and to take a digital photo of the manuscript*…

The email fills me with delight. Something I have sent out blindly has found a mark, and, what's more, elicited a human response. I imagine the librarian at her desk, a respectable level of darkness, where, like mushrooms, books thrive. The smell is of spores and animal skins. I ring up to give my credit card details, and, businesslike though she is, am blessed by this unexpected interaction to the point of tears. In a couple of hours the jpeg arrives. Something holds me back from opening it, as if I've pushed my way through trouser-legs and coattails to the front of the room, where, suddenly, a space opens up and there's no one between myself and it, whatever it turns out to be.



Lines.
"I am"

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1

I am — yet what I am, none cares or knows;
My friends forsake me like a memory lost:—
I am the self-consumer of my woes;—
They rise and vanish in oblivious host,
Like shadows in love frenzied stifled throes:—
And yet I am, and live — like vapours tost

2

Into the nothingness of scorn and noise,—
Into the living sea of waking dreams,
Where there is neither sense of life or joys,
But the vast shipwreck of my lifes esteems;
Even the dearest, that I love the best
Are strange — nay, rather, stranger than the rest.

3

I long for scenes, where man hath never trod
A place where woman never smiled or wept
There to abide with my Creator, God;
And sleep as I in childhoods, sweetly slept.
Untroubling, and untroubled where I lie,
The grass below;— above, the vaulted sky.

Even though the encounter is virtual, there is a thrill at witnessing the curve of the page, the brown ink of the cursive italic, the pencilled emendations. Now I understand how irresistible it has been for editors to wade in. Is the pencil Clare's, or someone else's? Is it "oblivion

host", "oblivious host" or "oblivion's host"? The most important line for me is there, but, again, not categorically so, crucial parts pencilled over or rubbed out: "Like shadows in love[] frenz[ied] stifled throes".

The second email arrives. This time, there's a copy, white against black, of the newspaper column of the *Bedford Times*, 1 January 1848. Here is Thomas Inskip's letter of recommendation, describing the poem as "a beam of light, beautiful in its loneliness, a mild ray gleaming through the shattered casement of a noble ruin!" But in the poem that follows the crucial line has been replaced with "Like shades in Love and Death's oblivion tost". This is not, as Bate describes it, a minor textual variation, it is everything – this is where the poem has been de-sexed.

I can imagine now that between them, Inskip and Knight (perhaps, even, with Clare's assent) agree to opt for the more 'noble', printable line. And once established in print, this is the version that Dr Wing uses to mark Clare's dying, quoting it in full in his 1864 Annual Report of the Asylum, a version that is preserved more or less into the twentieth century through various editors, often poets - Norman Gale, Arthur Symons and Edmund Blunden – through the two-volume edition produced by J.W. Tibble in the 1930s, and ending up in the mid 80s on a poster in the London Underground. It's a more polished version than the Frederick Martin and *Spectator* draft, but, like theirs, it is not the original.

Not until the end of August do I find myself sitting in a library, a paper mask strapped on for the duration. Unable to source the book online, I've ordered up Geoffrey Grigson's *Poems of John Clare's Madness* (1949). Grigson went back to look at the manuscripts for himself, and, as well as supplying new poems, says that he discovered "many differences of text" in those that had already been published. I am hopeful: Page 132, 'I am'. I dive straight for the line, and there it is: "Like shadows in love's frenzied, stifled throes"! Over a hundred years since the line was first conceived, a hundred years since someone took the trouble to go back and listen properly. Here is the moment the line enters the printed language. The circuit lights up, my glasses steam.

It is because the manuscripts are so scrappy, irregular in spelling and grammar, that they've offered a field day to editors, particularly those who want to stake a claim. In 1965, an academic, Eric Robinson somehow managed to get his hands on the copyright in the published and unpublished works for a pound. He spent years working on editions of the poems, which would bring them back as close as they could be to the original unedited

manuscripts. It was a Herculean labour, yet for his services he reserved an assumed right as copyright holder, a stranglehold on the reproduction of the poems that has only recently been loosened, and may explain why the doctored version of 'I am' of earlier editions persists even now.

Punctuation in the asylum poems is even less authoritative, relying on the vagaries of Knight's executive hand. It's possible at least to see how closely Jonathan Bate's latest version (a version used by Paul Farley in his 2007 *Selected*) corresponds to Knight's. The only distinctive variant is Bate's reading of the errant line, where (although he's not the first to do so), he converts 'love' from a noun to a compound adjective, 'love-frenzied'.

The manuscript is rubbed in the crucial places. But there is precedence in Knight for leaving out the possessive apostrophe: it isn't there, for instance, in line 9, in 'lifes esteems'. And the personification of love which the apostrophe confers ('Love's', as in Grigson) does not seem so far-fetched when, in the 1848 version, Love and Death are both embodied. That replacement line, 'Like shades in love['s], might be seen as a simple reworking of 'Like shadows in love's'. In terms of rhythm, too, that hyphen in 'love-frenzied' defuses the full weight of the beat that otherwise hits the end of the line with such contrapuntal vigour: '*frenz*ied, *stif*led *throes*'. Such are the kinds of editorial quibble that have bedevilled Clare since he was first published.

Slipperiness was a feature of Clare's life as well as his work. Dr Nesbitt, one of the asylum doctors, observed:

> he may be said to have lost his own personal identity as with all the gravity of truth he would maintain that he had written the works of Byron, and Sir Walter Scott, that he was Nelson and Wellington, that he had fought and won the battle of Waterloo.

In a fragment called 'Self-Identity', written in about 1841, Clare reassures himself on the subject of changeablity: "I shall never be in three places at once," he says, "or ever change to a woman and that ought to be some comfort amid this moral or immoral 'changing' in life…". Mental aberration and genius: the element of madness is hard to gauge. But imagine if Clare had had access to Walt Whitman, only a generation younger, who in 1855 had published in *Leaves of Grass*, his 'Song of Myself': "I am large, I contain multitudes."

It was William Knight who recognised better than any of the doctors that the integrity of Clare's identity was bound up in his writing. Clare's mind, he observed, "must be employed in writing poetry or Clare will be Clare no longer."

I don't know what I've achieved if anything in beavering away at the poem, squirrelling out the variant and deviant versions, hampered by the extent to which I could find texts online. But I do know that in the memorialising of it and the thinking about it, I have not been lonely. I am not John Clare, not struggling to keep my family clothed and fed, hobbled by mental illness, so much so that my wife, for the second time, has me consigned to the asylum, where I will live, chewing tobacco, for the last twenty-three years of my life. I am not, and yet it's possible to feel that I am. I learn and recite each line as if it is a combination that one by one will give me a clearer understanding of myself.

There's a field I love to walk in. It lies at exactly the same angle as a field I played in as a child. I remember skipping down as if someone else was there beside me, watching how well I negotiated the tussocks and dips, looking forward to a time when I was grown up and that person would materialise and be with me.

It didn't turn out that way. And yet, walking the field again, slantwise, I can feel a presence, someone who knows the names of every single flower, thistle, clover. And I'm reminded by the angle of the field, which allows me to believe in a world that is round and not flat, of the carefree hopefulness between field and sky, as close as possible to the feeling of being held by gravity from falling off.